

## A CHRISTMAS WHITE ELEPHANT.

(Concluded.)

By W. A. WILSON.

ONE windy night toward the end of January, Fred was awakened by the slamming of the folding windows in a room down-stairs.

He lay, reluctant to rise, for some moments, but on the noise being repeated, sprang out of bed, and put on his slippers.

Passing the staircase window like a ghost, he reached the hall, and moved toward the parlor door. The shutters were closed, and the room was dark. After feeling about and upsetting a vase of water filled with flowers, and a few glasses and ornaments on a table, he succeeded in finding the matches and struck a light.

He opened the door of the room whence the noise was coming; but, as he did so, the window was blown wide open, his lamp was extinguished, and he found himself in an almost forgotten presence.

Majestic and calm, within a few paces of him, stood the tree, in the great flood of moonlight which streamed in past the fluttering curtains.

Fifteen seconds later, Fred had shuffled up the staircase, and was coiled up in his bed again.

He told Cecie in the morning.

The tree's old friends had missed it, she said, and had come to pay it a visit to see how it was getting on.

"What *friends*?" asked Frederick-of-the-Guilty-Conscience.

"The Moonlight and the Wind," said Cecie.

"Oh," said Fred.

That this little episode impressed Cecie was evident; but it was not until the following Saturday that she said anything of an idea which it seemed to have suggested to her. It was the first time since New Year's that Fred had found time to run out beyond the city, which he was in the habit of doing as often as he could, to spend a few hours in the pure, fresh air of his

favorite woods. Agnes usually accompanied him, and, for the first time, they yielded to Cecie's entreaties, and took her also with them.

These snatches of health-giving air, these walks, short though they were, on the country soil, were everything to Fred. Two hours of freedom amongst the trees, in the silence of the forest, he used to say, were enough to clear a week's cobwebs from the brain. They did more for him that day — they solved the problem of the tree.

To reach their favorite walk it was necessary to go by steamboat to a station down the river, and thence climb a short, steep hill to a wood which stretched for miles beyond. It was apt to be dusty and less attractive in the summer months, but in late autumn and winter and early spring, when deserted by the picnicking crowd, it was a beautiful and peaceful spot. The favorite corner of Fred's was a small pond which lay in the midst of a thicket of young elms and oaks. When Cecie saw this for the first time she remained very quiet for some moments. Two fir-trees growing together at a corner of the pond seemed to have attracted her attention.

"What are you thinking about?" asked her father.

"I am thinking — why not send our tree out here and let it grow beside the others? Look at these two poor trees standing over there, all alone. It would be happier too, I think. It would like to be beside them."

"Do you think it would?" asked Fred, musingly.

"I am sure of it!" cried Cecie, excitedly. "It would get the dew, and the wind, and the rain, and the sun, and could grow and grow all the time. I am afraid it won't grow much with us."

An hour afterward they stood on the pier



watching their steamboat coming up the river.

"Now," said Fred, who seemed to be in unusually good spirits, "we have only to ask Robin if he is willing."

"Willing—what to do?"

"To let us send his present into the woods to live, instead of

keeping it ourselves," said Fred, quite gravely.

"Oh, he will," said Cecie, confidently. "I will go and ask him. Nurse can take me—to-morrow morning—before breakfast-time."

"I think I would n't go quite so soon," said her father, with an amused look. "Robin does n't—I mean Robin is very busy in the early mornings."

"WHY NOT SEND OUR TREE OUT HERE AND LET IT GROW BESIDE THE OTHERS?"

The snow and ice had disappeared from the streets and avenues, and in the mild skies of the early days of February there was a glad respite from the cold, and a welcome promise of the coming spring.

The sun no longer hid behind banks of fog; but rose from day to day with clear and lustrous face. The mists had gathered up their

trains and fled, and the skies were filled with armies of fleecy clouds. The grass in the parks seemed already to feel the breath of April, the crocuses peeped out from their beds of earth and hurried on their yellow garments, while the trees donned a livery of tiny buds and stood in sleepy readiness for the festival. The busy steamers plying up and down the river became suddenly gay with color; for the passengers no longer huddled together in heated cabins, but crowded out upon the deck that they might breathe the fresh air.

Beyond the city, nature seemed less eager to listen to fair promises, for her landscapes lay still as they had been left by the marauding winds of winter. The country roads were bleak and bare, the shrubs and hedges stripped of their leaves and left stifled with snow and mud, and the deserted footpaths wandered listlessly through the maze of trunks and branches and lawless thorns. Yet when the sun shone into the thickets and down upon the inert ground, everything seemed to quicken: the ice retreated into the shady corners of the ponds, the drowsy trees lazily stretched themselves, and here and there in the recesses a bird took courage and began piping feeble snatches of almost forgotten song.

On the afternoon of one of these early February days the deserted woods seemed quieter even than they had been in the dead of winter. There was not a breath of wind to ruffle the surface of the pond beside which a young fir-tree had recently been planted. Far in the distance a dog's bark or a cockcrow might be heard; still farther, perhaps, a long, faint whistle from a train winding along the river's bank; or, nearer at hand, the rustle of a falling leaf: but these only served to make the silence more profound.

Close beside two other firs, standing in friendly reserve somewhat aloof from the attendant herd of young oaks and elms, the new member of the mute community depended its lustrous green reflection into the somber mirror at its feet. Behind it rose the slender stems of two silver birches. In a corner near at hand a marsh-willow had burst into a mist of downy buds; and, still nearer, an old oak, as if to show an example to the younger members of its

family, who still clung to their tattered covering of leaves, stretched its bare and rugged limbs far up above its neighbors, and stood, stern and weather-beaten, on its carpet of grass and fallen acorns.

The mossy footpath which skirted the pond led to a clearing in the wood where it joined a broader way. This crossed a more open tract of ground covered with bushes and clogged with heather and dark-leaved brambles, until at one corner the country road appeared from behind a clump of trees. Between this corner and the point, some distance further on, where the road descended the wooded hill leading to the river, a gardener's cottage was situated.

At the gate of this cottage, toward sunset on a February afternoon, three figures were standing. The one, in colored shirt-sleeves and ample corduroys, wore a gardener's blue apron; the others were clad in the more conventional clothing of the city.

One of them wore a dark hat and cloak, and beside him stood a little figure dressed in a quaint gown of blue trimmed with sable. From beneath the felt and feathers of her hat one of her blonde curls escaped and lay gracefully upon her shoulder.

A fourth figure, that of the gardener's wife, a motherly-looking woman in a faded cotton dress, presently disappeared into a small greenhouse near the cottage, and closed the door behind her.

"Well," said the owner of the blue apron, in an affable tone, to his visitors, when at length they prepared to leave, "I suppose Missy will be satisfied now."

"I think so," said the figure in the cloak, looking down to "Missy," who smiled a shy assent. "I certainly am very well satisfied," he added, with a quizzical look, while buttoning his cloak.

When they set out, a few minutes later, the sun was glittering behind the trees, the earth was strong and deep in color, and the sky was filled with light.

They had reached the point where the road dipped suddenly in the direction of the steamer pier, when the door of the greenhouse opened, and the woman with the faded gown reappeared,

gone, she threw her scissors down upon a table, ran past her husband, who was lingering at the gate, and hastened after them along the road.

They turned on hearing her, and when she reached them she bent down, and, with a mixture of hesitancy and tenderness, placed the flowers between two small, gloved hands, and retreated.

A minute afterward she was standing in



"I SUPPOSE MISSY WILL BE SATISFIED NOW."

tying up a bouquet as she walked slowly into the garden.

She did not look up at first, but when she did so and found that the strangers had

the middle of the empty road, bareheaded, and with cheeks hot and flushed, watching a waving cloak and a little dot of blue gradually disappearing down the avenue.